



Lesson Plans and Games: A Primer

One of the most rewarding ways to be an ambassador for the hobby of gaming is to volunteer your time and games for a local school. Many schools have afterschool or elective periods that are convenient for teaching games. Of course, games as part of the actual classroom experience would be even more powerful.

Often, the tricky part is demonstrating to educators what skills and lessons games can teach to students. It's usually not enough to simply offer to run games, or say that a game is "educational." What is needed is a way to effectively and knowledgeably communicate that the game or exercise you are proposing will be useful to students. Schools are under pressure to meet certain national and state standards, and classroom time is a valuable and limited resource.

Game companies use rulebooks to communicate how to play a game and how to structure the experience for the maximum enjoyment. Players know that the rulebook is their information resource, and rulebooks follow common outlines to give players a sense of familiarity with the way the rules are shown. A format also exists for teachers to learn to use and adapt games--the lesson plan.

There are a core set of elements lesson plan contain:

- Who the lesson plan is designed for: the demographic of student the plan is designed for
- What general educational topic is covered by the lesson plan: the class (math, history, etc.) the plan is most applicable to
- What educational standards or goals the plan is designed to teach: this should be as specific as possible, showing the federal or state educational objective that the lesson plan will meet
- Equipment needed to teach the lesson: any classroom or student materials needed for the exercise
- Background and instructions for the teacher on teaching the lesson: this is the "teacher's version" of the material, giving any necessary background and foundation to help frame the exercise
- Activities to be done with the class: the actual steps and exercises for students to accomplish

The challenge in designing a classroom program incorporating games is justifying the social and "fun" attributes of game-playing with the educational goals of a classroom. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive activities, and any good teacher will tell you that a mix of all of the above will make for a potent experience. However, taking the time to structure the goals and activity in the form of a lesson plan will force you to think about the constraints of a classroom and your audience.

For example, most classroom periods run less than an hour. If you intend to use a game that would normally take multiple hours to complete, you might find a part of the game or elements of the games that can be used and taught within that time period. This acts as a "teaser" for the game, and lets you turn a classroom activity into the chance to revisit the game as an afterschool or recreational activity.

Many teachers will have to explain to administrators how games in their classroom are educational. Doing this legwork for the teacher will result in not only easing the amount of research they have to do to justify the activity, but may help a teacher who is not familiar with the game to understand why the game might be appropriate for his or her classroom.

What follows are two examples of lesson plans that Mayfair Games has developed, and some of the considerations and challenges that went into their development. Every game will be different, but these examples illustrate the process to translate a game into a lesson plan.

Empire Builder

This game is a game that teaches economics, geography, history and more (see Empire Builder: Ideas for Educational Use, GQM Issue #7, Fall 2005). However, the length of the game (roughly one hour per player) makes the game difficult to use during the course of a school day. Consequently, for our first lesson plan, we focused on the most visible part of the game: the map.

For those unfamiliar with Empire Builder, the board shows a map of the United States, showing cities, topological features and the resources associated with them. The entire board is laminated, for players to draw on in crayon. We developed a historical lesson that would incorporate the map as part of the lesson, both as a map and as a teaching tool. The core of the exercise was to demonstrate the pattern of U.S. westward expansion, and the factors that played into it.

Students are given pre-exercise work to learn the incorporation dates of a variety of cities. Those years are written onto the Empire Builder map, and the various waves of settlement (pre 1848, 1850-1854, and post-1854) are noted and discussed. The three major reasons for development of an area (resources, railroads and the military) are discussed, with a final assignment of having student think about the advantages their own hometown's area would have if a railroad were considering development in their area.

The exercise nicely illustrates the historical research that makes Empire Builder such a rich game, and directly fits into a U.S. history curriculum. By seeing the map in this setting, students can become curious about the game, and creates interest to play the game later.

Road to the White House

This Mayfair game follows a political campaign over the course of a primary or election cycle, with players trying to jockey their candidates to the top of the ballot. The game can be played with several levels of complexity, and, again, the length of time that the game takes to play makes it difficult to include as a typical classroom exercise.

The core mechanic of the game is the use of candidates' issues ratings, which are used to gather votes from like-minded people, raise money and gather endorsements. After a seminar session with educators at a game convention last year, we developed a way of using the idea of candidates appealing to constituents because of their stands on issues.

Students are asked to research the candidates' stands on a variety of issues for a race chosen by the teacher. For each issue, the student is required to obtain two quotes on the issue from the candidates, from their own campaign materials or another direct source. Students then choose one of the candidates based on their reactions to the quotes. A ranking and scoring methodology is provided with the lesson plan to rank the issues based on their popularity with the students, assign a value ranking to the issue, and award votes based on the students' choices.

The lesson plan was developed to teach students to research and evaluate candidates based on direct sources (rather than editorials, columnists and the like), and show that, although some issues will hold more weight than others with voters, all issues can contribute to the performance of a candidate. In addition, the plan illustrates the importance and volatility of issues in a campaign.

In both of the above examples, elements of the actual game are used as part of the classroom exercise, but the game is supported by the exercise. Even though no actual rules are taught, using the game as a teaching tool lets students learn that games can be more than just "fun time" activities, without decreasing their actual entertainment value. As you decide how you want to incorporate games into an educational setting, creating a lesson plan will help you decide how best to use the time available, and how to most effectively communicate to the people who will be using your plans!